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ABSTRACT

Qualitative research that takes into account children's views of themselves as well as their own assessments of their talents and capabilities in reading and other academic areas can enhance understandings already established in research and measured by standardized instruments. New avenues of qualitative research can prove amenable to assessing psychological and socioemotional characteristics of reading achievement. Overreliance on quantitative methods in assessing children's academic progress can result in a dehumanized, fragmented picture of the child. Qualitative research methods, on the other hand, can help solve the problems of analyzing the individual student in a holistic way and determining the teacher's role and importance in assessing his or her own students. The complexity of the child's reading attitudes and the obvious link with the child's individuality and personality necessitate the use of varied research methods. Possible qualitative research strategies that can be used for assessing attitudes toward reading include interviews with students, student logs, observation, teacher opinions, sociometric techniques, frequency counts of books read or checked out of the library, behavioral observations of facial expressions and nonverbal behaviors, and attitude scales. Quantitative and qualitative research techniques should be complementary rather than in opposition to or mutually exclusive of one another. (HOD)

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ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO THE ASSESSMENT OF READING ATTITUDE

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ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO THE ASSESSMENT OF READING ATTITUDE

The amount of research on children's attitudes toward reading is relatively small in comparison to the total body of research on children and reading. Moreover, a vast untapped area of inquiry, research, and academic speculation exists in regard to qualitative assessment and evaluation of children's attitudes toward reading. When one considers that subjective elements such as teachers' opinions and students' feelings about themselves can be used to enhance the interpretation of quantitative measures, it becomes apparent that there are many modes of research which can be used in conjunction with one another to gain a greater picture of each child's reading performance. Many features of the child's personality and his or her unique interests and talents can shed light upon his or her specific achievements or failures in reading.

Factor analytic studies of reading by Wallbrown and others (Engin, Wallbrown, & Brown, 1976; Wallbrown, Brown, & Engin, 1978) suggest that reading attitude is a complex, multifactored phenomenon which cannot be adequately described by a single score (Wallbrown, Levine, Singleton, & Engin, 1981). Furthermore, a series of additional studies provide tentative information concerning the relationship between reading attitudes and cognitive styles (Brown, Engin, & Wallbrown, 1978; Blaha & Chomin, 1981) and reading attitudes and classroom behavior (Wallbrown & Blaha, 1981). The results of the Wallbrown, Vance, and Prichard (1979) study show substantial difference between the attitudes which normal and reading disabled students express toward reading. In addition, the results of the Brown, Engin, and Wallbrown (1978) study provide information about developmental trends for inner-city children, and the find-

ings from the Wallbrown, Levine, and Engin (1981) study include an examination of both sex differences and developmental changes for rural children. Finally, the results of the Wallbrown, Levine, Singleton, and Engin (1981) study provide information about the reliability of the various dimensions of reading attitude.

The aforementioned studies and other statistical-quantitative research provide a foundation for several varieties of qualitative research which the authors will propose. Such correlations as those established between reading attitude and cognitive style and reading attitude and classroom behavior point to a complexity of relationships which undoubtedly exists between reading attitude and numerous personality variables. Qualitative research which takes into account children's views of themselves, as well as their own assessments of their talents and capabilities in reading and other academic areas, can enhance understandings already established in research and measured by standardized instruments. New avenues of qualitative research can prove amenable to assessing psychological socioemotional characteristics of reading achievement. A single child's attitude toward reading cannot be understood apart from his or her unique life's situation or individual personality traits. Kurt Lewin stated this idea very well when he said, "A teacher will never succeed in giving proper guidance to a child if he (or she) doesn't learn to understand the psychological world in which that individual child lives (Zais, 1976, p. 244).

Qualitative research methods which embrace many informal techniques of assessment bring real adequacy to the problem of:

1. analyzing the individual student in a holistic way, as well as to the problem of
2. the teacher's role and importance in assessing his or her own students: their interests, capabilities, and levels of confidence.

Person-centered psychology and child-centered thinking in education have generated an entire body of literature which takes account of the child as an individual; whereas, experimental psychology has given rise to a distinctly different view of the child. The former view looks upon the child as a unique self and the latter tends to compare the child, either as an individual or as part of a delineated population, with other students on the basis of specific traits or facets of school achievement. No small controversy has arisen between the so-called child-centered theorists, on the one hand, and the subject-centered or competency-based thinkers on the other. Such a schism can be traced historically in this century to a basic philosophic difference between John Dewey and Edward L. Thorndike. Daniel and Laurel Tanner--leading curriculum thinkers and commentators of Dewey's ideas and works--made this very revealing statement in their 1980 work entitled Curriculum Development:

Dewey repeatedly took issue with those who sought to reduce education to quantifiable measurements as though such reductionism made education scientific. He noted that quantitative measures in education through IQ and standardized achievement testing, as well as in determining objectives, were being promoted on the grounds of educational efficiency; but such efficiency was conceived in terms of perpetuating the present order. For Dewey, as we know, the function of education is to unleash human potentials, not to set limitations... The outcome of scientific methods is not uniformity and standardization of procedure but the liberation of individuals by enabling them to see new problems, devise new procedures--thereby making for diversification rather than for set uniformity.

Addressing the same problem, Bode took issue with those who view education as being properly reduced to the attainment and assessment of quantification skills as though such a function removed education from the wider social concerns and made education neutral. To Bode, such efforts limited education to fitting individuals as cogs in the existing social mechanism and thereby reflected the aristocratic tradition...

Both quantitative and qualitative methods are, in fact, valuable, and the greater use of qualitative forms of research could diminish controversy in the field of education and expedite advances in educational research.

Overreliance on quantitative methods in assessing children's academic progress can result in a "dehumanized" picture of the child and can present a fragmented view of the child. In reality, however, the person to whom quantified scores are most usable, in terms of the achievement of specific children, is the classroom teacher. In the utilization of test scores and standardized measures, the teacher has the strong advantage of a fuller knowledge of each child which he or she has gained in classroom interaction with the child. This crucial, larger knowledge which the teacher has of the child is what enables him or her to meaningfully use test scores and other quantified data in application to the child's progress in school. Furthermore, the sort of knowledge which the teacher acquires, through inter-personal interaction with the child is generally of a subjective nature and could itself be examined through teacher interviews and other qualitative methods. Quantitative and qualitative research techniques can, it seems, be seen to be complementary rather than in opposition to or mutually exclusive of one another.

Elliot Eisner of Stanford University is one of the most eloquent spokesmen for the use of what he calls "artistic forms of understanding and reflection" (Eisner, 1979) in educational evaluation. Eisner feels that overemphasis on qualitative research has resulted from the predominant use of scientific epistemologies in educational research. He stated the following in his 1979 work, The Educational Imagination:

The consequences of the scientific view for education as a field and for curriculum as a part of that field emerge not only within the conception and conduct of educational research, but also within the methods that people believe appropriate for educational evaluation. Because evaluation methods are largely the offspring of the educational research community as it is presently defined, this is not surprising. But surprising or not, I believe that these practices have had deleterious consequences for the curriculum that is provided to children in American schools. One of these consequences is to reduce the term evaluation to measurement. Although each term is entirely independent--that is, one can evaluate without measuring and one can measure without evaluating (one can, of course, do both)--the belief that one must measure in order to evaluate is widespread. When this occurs, the fields that are most amenable to measurement are measured and those that are difficult to measure are neglected. What is measured then is emphasized in school programs

because measurement becomes the procedure through which educational quality is determined. (Eisner, 1979).

His point that aspects of schooling not amenable to being quantified are neglected is one that is plausible and one that creates a situation which could be alleviated by the judicious use of qualitative research methods. It seems we should continue to measure accurately and analyze statistically those aspects of children's behavior and academic performance which can be quantified, but proceed to augment such measurement with alternative evaluation measures which get at the qualitative features of schooling. Eisner has further said that

... we need to develop methods that will help us understand the kinds of experience children have in school and not only the kind of behavior they display. The behavioristic positivist tradition in American educational research tended to regard experience as unknowable and focused therefore on what children did. Although such an approach has its virtues operationally, behavior does not tell the whole story. As students of the hidden curriculum have told us, students learn more than they are taught and teachers teach more than they know. Attention only to what the school explicitly teaches or to what students do may be misinformative with respect to what they are learning and experiencing. (Eisner, 1979)

Eisner has described the phenomenon of educational connoisseurship as the "art of appreciating what is educationally significant" (Eisner, 1979). He continues to say that educational connoisseurship is a form of educational inquiry which is "qualitative in character and takes its lead from the work that critics have done in literature, theater, film, music, and the visual arts. Interest in

qualitative forms of research and evaluation has increased in recent years, but little work that has been done has been related to the fine arts. Most of those who have used qualitative approaches have related their work to ethnography. Yet, there is no area of human inquiry that epitomizes the qualitative more than what artists do when they work. Thus, it seems to me that if we seek to know what qualitative inquiry consists of, we can do little better than analyze the work of those from whom it is a necessary condition" (Eisner, 1979).

It might be reasonable to propose, based upon Eisner's ideas, that a literary essay or personal statement of the teacher's perceptions of the child accompany the long list of standardized test scores which are filed away in the child's cumulative school folder. In any case, a variety of interview and observation techniques could be useful in understanding individual students and would require the faculty of educational connoisseurship.

The earlier mentioned studies, as well as three studies completed by the authors in the last year, utilized the Survey of Reading Attitudes (authored by Wallbrown, Brown, and Engin) and verified that reading is a complex, multifactored phenomenon rather than a single, unitary dimension. The following eight dimensions of reading attitude were identified:

- (degree of) Expressed Reading Difficulty
- (validity of) Reading as Direct Reinforcement
- (degree of) Reading as Enjoyment
- (preference for) Alternative Learning Modes
- (degree of) Reading Anxiety
- (attitude toward) Reading Group
- (preference for) Silent versus Oral Reading
- (preference for) Comics

The complexity of the child's reading attitudes and the obvious link with the child's individuality and personality necessitate the use of varied research methods. The complexity of links between reading attitude and academic performance, cognitive style, and socioemotional maturity, etc. have led the authors to propose the following qualitative research strategies for assessing attitudes toward reading:

I. INTERVIEWS WITH STUDENTS

Structured interviews in which specific questions are asked of students could be conducted, as well as unstructured interviews in which students would be encouraged to talk about their feelings both positively and negatively. The interviewer might ask such questions as: What's it like when you take a reading test? or How do you feel when you take a reading test? What do you like about reading group? or What book are you in now? This type of open-ended questioning could generate a unique line of discussion in each interview and create an individualized body of information in the case of each student.

II. STUDENT LOGS

Students would be asked to keep a listing or a log of what they had read and what they thought about it. Students could be asked to record the amount of time they actually spent in each independent reading episode. Students would record their feelings, also, about each selection or book they completed. The logs themselves could be organized in numerous ways in accordance with the sorts of information sought by the researchers.

III. OBSERVATION

Simply watching children and assessing them by means of the artistic sense which Eisner calls educational connoisseurship can be very revealing. Observations can be meaningfully made in any number of settings--in the classroom, in the library, while the children are waiting for the school bus. As in the case of interviews, observations may be of two varieties:

1. structured, or
2. unstructured.

In a structured observation situation children could be given a specific period of time for self-selection of reading activities so that the observer could record how much time they actually spent on task in reading. A less structured type of observation setting could be created by rewarding children with 20 minutes or so of free time following a period of time in which they have been working well and have completed their academic assignments. Students, in such a situation, would be permitted to remain at their seats or proceed to an activity center or learning area in the room. In any case, they would be able to select any appropriate activity within the classroom--listening to tapes with headphones, etc. The observer could then note how many select reading, as well as what sorts of reading activities students choose.

IV. TEACHER OPINIONS

Teachers could be interviewed in regard to what an individual student's attitudes toward reading are. Students' perceptions of themselves--of their ability, feelings, achievements in reading--could be meaningfully compared with teachers' perceptions of children's difficulties and successes in reading achievement. A series of statements by teachers, kept over time, would reveal important patterns in progress toward the student's improved view of the importance of reading and of his or her own greater confidence in his ability to enjoy reading and to perform well in reading activities in school.

V. SOCIOMETRIC TECHNIQUES

Sociometric techniques could be used to tap valuable information which students have about each others' attitudes toward reading. An informal sociometric instrument could be comprised of such questions for students to answer about each other as:

- Who is the student who always likes to read difficult books?
- Who's the person who always "goofs off" during reading?
- Who's the person who likes to read books about horses?

Such an instrument would be given to the entire class and would comprise a peer assessment technique to be used in conjunction with other qualitative measures of reading attitude.

- VI. FREQUENCY COUNTS OF BOOKS READ OR CHECKED OUT OF THE LIBRARY
- VII. BEHAVIORAL OBSERVATION OF FACIAL EXPRESSIONS, BODY POSTURE,
AND NONVERBAL BEHAVIORS
- VIII. ATTITUDE SCALES similar to A SURVEY OF READING ATTITUDES BY
Wallbrown, Brown, and Engin.

The complexity of the phenomenon of children's reading attitudes necessitates that a variety of measures be used and that, over and against a unified numerical index of reading attitude, patterns of meaning be sought in light of both affective and cognitive features of students' reading ability and performance. What we have suggested here is that formalized measures derived from attitudinal scales be augmented with less formal assessments of children's attitudes and feelings by teachers and by the children themselves. Informal methods can surely meaningfully extend information gathered with reading scales which have been tested for construct validity, reliability, and stability (Vaughn, Jr., 1980). The Wallbrown, Brown, Engin scale, with which the authors have been working, for example, has been shown to be such a reliable instrument that can be used along with the less formal measures outlined to understand the ways in which students perceive their school performance in reading areas.

The authors are in agreement with George Alexander Kelly, author of the 1955 work, The Psychology of Personal Constructs, that the universe and the world around us are real, and very importantly, that equally real are the events which are internal to a person (Kelly, 1955). That is to say, then, that mental and emotional events which occur in the human mind have reality just as do the observable behaviors which occur in response to the outside world. Just as Albert Einstein found a real universe made up of provable absolutes, namely the speed of light, he also found that the understanding of

such absolutes was relative to the experience of individual human beings (Calder, 1979). Given that students in schools are human beings--each discovering the hard reality of the universe from a perspective which is unique to each of them, it is essential that we, as educators and researchers, develop ways to describe and take account of children's constructions of reality which encompass their feelings and their views of themselves and the world around them. A vast frontier for research and exploration awaits us.

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